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# Writing Through It

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Writing Through It

by

Casey Lowrey

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

Psychology

With a minor in  
Creative Writing

Thesis Adviser

Jaime Wood

Portland State University

2019

Dedicated to my dad, who I know is reading this from Heaven, and to my mom, my sister, and myself, as we find our ways through this.

An enormous thanks to my advisor, Jaime Wood, for being more than just an advisor. For being a coach, a friend, a literary critic, and an example to strive to be. This project would not be what it is without your help.

Writing is hard. Writing about writing is complicated. Trying to explain and categorize your own writing is immeasurable frustration. As with music, dishes, and dog breeds, there is spillover amongst the groupings. Writing is no exception. This project is no exception. I began with an immense amount of reading. I was hoping to find a genre that fit precisely with what I was picturing this project to materialize as. I could not find one. Several pieces of writing came close. *The Liars' Club* by Mary Karr combined honesty with comedy and created a memoir that reads more like a fiction page-turner than the memory of a dysfunctional childhood. In Karr's book, she details her difficult childhood that grappled with troubling issues of mental instability, alcohol abuse, and rape. Her book is split into three sections to discuss three separate periods of time in her life. She tackles upsetting content in a way that allows readers to swallow it. *The Glass Castle* is a memoir by Jeannette Walls that explores complicated relationships and the journey of three young adults who were forced to grow up a little too quickly.

*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse and *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Wolff both utilize poetry in a story-telling manner, introducing chronology, history and fluidity that can be difficult to come by in poetry. They both have a beginning, middle, and end. They are not simply collections of poetry that follow a theme or pattern. They tell stories of lives.

*Out of the Dust* is the story of a young daughter being raised by a father who undoubtedly loves her, but admittedly wanted a son. When a dust storm destroys the crops, the family enters hard times. In an unfortunate fire incident, the main character, a young Billie Jo, accidentally catches her mother's apron on fire. Her mother later dies while giving birth and her father takes up drinking. The title comes from the main character following a desire to move away from her home during the Dust Bowl Era, and live somewhere else. She ultimately ends up returning to her father and they begin to repair their damaged relationship. This entire story is told through a

series of poems separated into sections by dates. The poems are her vehicle for telling a tremendously powerful story without giving up too many of the moments.

*Make Lemonade* is the story of a seventeen-year-old girl who finds a babysitter to help with her two young children. The mother and babysitter become nothing short of a family, both girls learning how to navigate a world that has not come easily to either of them. Both of these books accomplished the challenging task of telling an entire story through poetry with complex relationships and histories and with difficult situations and sometimes humor.

All of these books were remarkable in their own distinct way, but none of them paralleled the project that I had been imagining. I read, reread, analyzed, contrasted, and then read, again, to assure my understanding of the material. My reading and rereading eventually and unknowingly seeped into stalling. I was lost in my own understanding of what this project was supposed to be, how it was supposed to look. I needed a clearer vision of what kind of work I would be doing and how I wanted it to be received in order to begin the writing process. I turned my reading into researching, attempting to decode the laws of writing and categorizing. I took different definitions from writers I admire, rolled them around on my tongue for a while, arranged them in degrees of palatability, and then returned to reading. There were two genres that seemed to incorporate the honesty, vulnerability, and palpability that I wanted to create. I had narrowed my categorization down to a complex fusion of poetry and memoir.

Isabel Allende, a writer typically of magical realism, says about memoir that it “forces [her] to stop and remember carefully. It is an exercise in truth.” This offered some clarity that I was lacking in terms of highlighting the truth about memory. This truth being that it is faulty. It has holes. It has faux walls and cardboard flooring. It drops nuances and mixes up facts. Early into the writing phase, I was confronted with the truth that my own memory is victim to these

same faults. This was the first scary moment in what would be six months of heart-pounding, knee-shaking, palm-sweating, hair-standing-on-end scary moments. I was introduced to gaping holes in the foundation of my memory. I ran face-first into the emptiness of my recollection. I had to admit first to myself and eventually to my readers that my memory was fallible and there were significant, defining moments that have slowly drifted out, quietly slipped away, or maybe stomped out leaving colossal footsteps the size of military tanks.

I found myself filling in moments with what I now know were false memories. I spent hours drawing charts and tracking timelines, reasoning with myself and the memories themselves, as if they were living alongside me. Finally, I started writing. It was hard. Homer Hickman, an American author, writes, “A lot of folks just get it into their head that, [...] you just write down what happened. It doesn’t quite work that way.” Mimicking the earlier part of this project, I wrote, erased, wrote, erased, went bottoms up on some Mexican tequila that I was saving for a special occasion, and vowed to abandon writing altogether. Then, I tried again. Allende and Hickman’s pieces of commentary on memoir writing gave me the much-needed support to recognize and admit, for the first time since I had started the project, that this project was challenging, complicated, character-defining and, above all, important. But I also found it a bit restricting. There were feelings and moments and revelations that refused to be explained within the realms of a prose memoir. I was unable to find the appropriate language. There was an abstractness to my emotions that would not translate. There was an authenticity in the sentiment that came out contrived.

It was in poetry that I found the space to expand. I found the space to take what felt restricting about other genres and mutilate the integrity of them. I found space to be confused, and as a result, confusing. I granted myself permission to be misunderstood, misinterpreted, and

unexplained. At first, I was not sure it was poetry I was writing. It was abstract, contradictory, sometimes mean, and often violent. Emily Dickinson said, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry.” This made sense to me. This made sense to my project. I found the path of writing this project needed to fall into, in order to reassemble my world. Writing these poems helped me piece back together what was inconceivably broken. This was the moment my convoluted idea manifested into a concrete project, albeit wet concrete, still to be molded.

Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* was a book I returned to several times before really beginning my own project. Didion’s memoir is an account of the year following the death of her husband and the caretaking of her sick daughter. Her exploration of grief and mourning and surviving was inspiring in terms of her ability to verbalize the experience—a feat I was hoping to conquer. I found particular comfort in her assessment of things feeling ephemeral and fleeting, even her memories. While her memoir does not incorporate poetry the way I desire to, the themes and motifs harmonized with the atmosphere I was writing in. I returned to this book often because of her ability to write honestly about what is painful. Grief is unexplainable, but she took her readers by their hands and led them through the baffling forest of anguish anyway. This was what I hope to do within my own memoir.

I was told, by a stranger, a long time ago, that the difference between an autobiography and a memoir is that an autobiography is a story of a life, and a memoir is a snapshot of that life. A single moment in time worth putting onto paper. A story worth documenting in a way that will remain in the world longer than those who lived it. Regardless of the definition one chooses to undertake, it boils down to the fundamental question of what is worth remembering and, furthermore, recording and sharing. That is often the first inkling of pressure for those trying to



document things they care about. But the moment the pressure really sets in is when you are sitting down at your computer in a coffee shop or at your notebook on the kitchen floor trying to do justice to the moments in your life which you have deemed worthy of recognition. Trying to put into words the trials and experiences that remain in the forefronts of your mind, infiltrating your thoughts on a daily basis. How do you assign language to things you cannot entirely understand? I believe the answer to that question is the one writing device that allows the writer to make as much or as little sense as possible. The genre of writing that does not require understanding on behalf of either the writer or the reader. A kind of play with language that sanctions unfounded claims and bizarre comparisons, even encourages them. Poetry.

Poetry is a funny little thing that asks people to do precisely what they do not want to do. It forces people into discomfort, into the unknown, into vulnerability. More than any other type of writing, it asks both the writer and the reader to approach the dark monster in the closet and duet with it. Yet somehow, it feels right. The moment you read a poem that, on a logical level, checks zero boxes, but you feel it in your bones anyway, is the reason it exists. In Federico Garcia Lorca's poem *Sleepless City*, he writes:

One day

horses will live in the saloons

and the enraged ants

will throw themselves on the yellow skies that take refuge in the eyes of cows.

Another day

we will watch the dried butterflies rise from the dead

and still walking through a landscape of gray sponges and silent ships

we will watch our ring flash while roses spill from our tongues.

The excerpt above represents a highly emotive and entirely confusing passage. The integration of sensitive images such as, “dried butterflies” and “roses spill[ing]] from our tongues” into deeply profound images such as “a landscape of gray sponges,” places the reader into a familiar yet confusing moment in time. It is the ‘I have been here before but I am not sure when’ kind of feeling. The moment when you understand but still cannot explain. The moments that elicit this feeling elicit poetry in me in the same way. The use of language in a new way that might not make sense is, by all counts, reasonable and necessary.

The next obstacle I ran into was the self-questioning and the concern about my writing being worthy to share a story that carries such weight. How could I do justice to this moment in time? How could I write a life? And did I deserve to? After hours of conversation with myself and a few more shots of tequila, I realized that, invariably, I had no choice but to write it. There was a lifetime rushing through my veins and draining out of my fingertips. So, I wrote it.

I was sitting in a nondescript desk in a nondescript high school geometry class as a nondescript freshman. I was probably doodling unremarkable figures onto my desk as a legacy for whoever would take the desk over the following period. I would often come in the next day to find equally unremarkable response doodles. A few months into the semester, I got the news of my grandfather’s death. Corvallis being a small-enough town, most of my high school received the news as well. A few days afterward, I got a message from someone I did not recognize. By then, I was knee-deep in condolences from strangers and did not think much of it. I returned the obligatory gratitude and went back to menial distractions. This particular stranger was much taller than me with long limbs that would still take him a few more years to fill out.

His red hair framed his freckled face and his sheepish smile hid his restless spirit. Over the next few weeks, we shared several ordinary dialogues. Homework assignments, test score comparisons, all the miserable activities we would rather be doing over geometry.

The casual dialogue turned into casual dates, which then morphed into serious dates and eventually a relationship. Out of this came dances and trips and the meeting of parents and Floral Monday. He made it his goal to surprise me with flowers every Monday. I would find them in my locker, in my car, waiting on my doorstep. Sometimes they would be accompanied with little love notes or small trinkets of affection. I wrote poems for him. He made mixtapes of songs that reminded him of me, and I would learn to play them on guitar for him.

Immediately out of high school, he joined the military. It was his dream for as long as I had known him and I was both proud and scared. It was all he could talk about for weeks and his admiration for those before him cemented my support of his decision. Before he left, he gave me a ring and we cemented our engagement to each other. Being as young as we were, the idea of keeping that commitment a secret seemed exciting and cinematic. For the eight months that he was gone for training, we wrote letters back and forth nearly every day. They currently sit in my Kyle Box underneath my bed, next to his favorite red blanket and a shell from the beach with “I love you” written on it, messily, in permanent ink.

Deep-set bruise shaped eyes  
wandering and interjecting  
waiting at the edge of the river ready  
to jump into mouths and floor lungs.  
Count the fish that get caught in the teeth and wish them well.  
Is love quantifiable?  
How many loves does it take  
    to break the mechanics of coffee brewed?  
    to disperse eyelashes whispering of sleep like dandelion puffs?  
    to turn a purple bruise into a green memory?

*Skin on skin on skin*

You toy with the idea of shoveling gravel into your lungs  
but the longer you stay here  
the later it gets

    and you were already choking.

Twisting words into poetry  
slipping up on sentiments

the mechanical movements of  
picking up a lover's mannerisms

waiting for the right moment to  
turn a couplet into a quatrain

but never quite finding it.

Waiting for something to hang a heavy heart on.

You left skincrumbs everywhere you went  
I am still finding them in my cushions  
I am still finding them under my nails.

I built my home in your stomach  
attached bridges to your arms  
that led to a park in one palm  
in the other, a grocery store.

Slid down your thigh-slides onto your beached toes  
to watch the sun fall to its knees  
at the sight of the moon.

Took cover under your eyelashes  
used your ribcage as monkey bars  
(accidentally breaking them off one  
by one by  
one).

Used your spine to adhere my books  
and sat on your shoulder  
as you read them to me

I built my home in your stomach  
It is flooded now.

The liver that I perched on  
is floating out your ears like a stream.

There is wreckage in the home  
That I built  
in you

I think the foundation  
was faulty.

I could love you so much better now  
than I ever could back then.

I could paint murals on your canvas skin now  
grow gardens with the wells atop your cheeks now  
hold your heart with both my hands instead of balancing it on one now.

I was too young to love you  
that way

too young to see that you were clawing your own throat out  
swallowing your own tongue  
breaking off your ribs one by one to leave as bread crumbs.

and too young to know I'd be spending the rest  
of my life  
writing poetry about how  
I could love you now

### **This might be an apology**

I didn't understand what you meant when  
you told me your arms were sinking deep like lead.

I was too direct  
*you hadn't yet handed me the tools to wire my own jaw shut*

I didn't understand  
you didn't need to be full  
*you just didn't want to be empty anymore.*

I didn't understand your love letters  
how if I held them up to the light  
there would be watermarks detailing the strangers in your bones  
stirring in your stomach  
using your spleen as collateral.

You used to tell me  
*Melting wax doesn't intend to burn the collar bone it pools in*  
I hope I never learn what this means.

I know that kisses can leave watercolor stains  
purples weaving into greens

I understand                                      now                                      why you screamed  
when you told me  
you wanted to feel that fluttering in your stomach  
and I told you to swallow a baby bird.



He came back different. He came back more confident, more extraverted, more in love. He came back more compassionate too. While he was deciding on what the next chapter of his life would look like, he worked at a gas station to pay rent. One of his proudest moments was when a woman brought him homemade cookies to thank him. She had been there the day before with four kids in her van, exhaustion from a life lived in her eyes, and only \$7.00 to spend on gas. He filled up her tank with his own money. That was Kyle. He was genuine and selfless. He was someone who would ask how your day was and sincerely care about the answer. He was thoughtful in ways that redefined the word itself. These were the moments when I started to understand love stories.

The moment I really started to understand poetry was the morning I got The Call. It was around 7:30 a.m. on a school day. I was half-dressed getting ready for class when I saw his mother's name on my phone. I answered the phone and she immediately asked what I was doing. I nonchalantly told her I was getting ready to leave for school as I buttoned my jeans. To be completely honest, I do not remember the precise language she used to tell me that Kyle had ended his own life earlier that morning. Or maybe the previous night. What I do remember is her asking if my mother was there. And thank god she did because at some point between her telling me what happened and inquiring about my mother, I had collapsed to my knees on my bedroom floor, momentarily paralyzed. I staggered through the darkened hallway and balanced myself on our glass front door through which I was watching my mom. She was steadying her travel mug filled with coffee the color of poplar on the roof of her car. It shook as she opened the door. I could see the horror on her face as she turned and saw her youngest daughter pounding on the glass door, shoeless and manic. She started back toward the house leaving the car running and

the door open. I repeated what his mother had told me, emptily, as if I didn't really grasp what I was saying. I probably didn't.

I have to admit, now, that my chronology is unreliable, and my memory unsteady and frequently shifting. The moments following the phone call are flashes of tears and hugs and emotionless staring at the floor or the wall or anything that would stay still for me. My sister was in Monmouth for school at the time. I do not recall if my parents called and told her on the way or waited to tell her in person. I was not involved in the relay of the information. It mostly happened around me. Things happening around me was to become an important theme over the following months. The words sort of floated around me. I could probably have reached out and plucked them from the air if only I could have convinced my body to move. I sat in the car staring at the seat in front of me all the way to Monmouth, and held my position all the way back home, now with my sister in the car.

The ride back was quiet. The hum of the other cars on the freeway became the most prominent sound. I watched the other drivers and passengers commuting, unaware of what had happened. I think someone tried to turn on the radio to break the painful silence, but the songs were all wrong. They were too happy or too sad or they appeared on the mixtapes he had made for me. I felt angry that they did not know. I felt angry that they were allowed to go about their days without noticing the shift in the cosmos, the black hole that had opened up right in the middle of Corvallis. I felt angry at the blunt-force trauma of learning that the size of impact was, perhaps, lesser than it felt. The recognition that each and every person driving on that freeway was distracted by something else made me feel small. And the way that the wind shifted the trees towards his house, or the way the sun stayed at the perfect height to bounce off of his flushed strands of hair, had he been there, made him seem big. Bigger than ever before. All the streets in

my neighborhood looked different. The roads that I had driven, walked, roller-bladed and tripped down for seventeen years looked unfamiliar. I noticed houses I had never seen before, statues that suddenly carried saddened expressions, plants that had always stood six-foot-tall before were wilting like a time-lapse in front of me.

It seemed like everyone in town knew. Face after face shot bullets through my car window, embedded with secret messages of pity and concern. Everyone was waiting for wells to form into my skin leaving holes they could see straight through, or for the top of my head to split open as plants blossomed out of it, keeping their distance for fear of thorns. This kind of thing didn't happen in the town I grew up in, and we were all watching closely at the wreckage that was forming. We pulled into the driveway that somehow seemed more unfamiliar than the rest of the town. I sat in the car reminding my body of the duties it was responsible for, discussing the particulars of lifting my feet from the carpeted ground and turning them towards the cement stained with blood from years of scraped knees. Retraining my arms on the specifics of where to put pressure in order to propel myself out of the seat and onto the ground. Finally, I made my way into the house. The unfamiliarity was wearing off and shifting into more of a numbness; a lack of searching for familiarity. I spent the next few hours sitting on the living room couch staring out the glass door that I had met him at so many times before. My family took shifts sitting with me, making calls to schools, work, family who would want to know. I have no recollection of eating anything for at least the next few days. Unsurprisingly, I missed school that day, which happened to be a Friday. The weekend is almost completely gone from my memory, but I think I remember his parents stopping by for only a few minutes. His mother might have spoken with mine for a while, but I do not remember them being there for long.

**Heartskin**

The boy with the skin  
    and the sad laugh asks me  
where will you go after you have swallowed all the water?  
And I think I am edgy in a  
    Dark lipstick, smudged eyeliner, holey fishnets, drinking all the water sort of way  
but you see a girl gutted  
    like a fish slimy and boney  
        or just a skull and some ribs. I don't know.

The nameless nobody  
    With the size eleven shoes  
        And the right ear slightly bigger than the left  
asks you where you first heard the word articulate  
    and it didn't hurt  
and you sadlaughed and shrugged  
    pulled my fishrib out to floss

## And We Were

I was demolition  
staring down elevator shafts.

You fed off the seduction  
tasted so sweet you couldn't feel  
my whiskey tongue burning the side of your throat  
leaving hollow grooves where freckles used to curtsy.

I was free falling out over the highway  
hitting on your friends in the back of the bar.

I was poetry until four in the morning  
and wondering if you would ever see me again.

I was a car crash      bleeding wrists      so bad I could never be good.

And you  
a ghost shrieking a thousand empty words  
lodged in your throat.

You tried to swallow your own tongue  
but the commitment made you choke  
and it didn't matter because  
in the end  
your cheeks were disintegrating  
your teeth were shattering  
your heart was beating a little too fast

but we were impressed it was beating at all.

## **I have a Superiority Complex Because I Don't Smoke Marlboro**

If you give me an instrument  
 - it's true, any instrument -  
 I can learn a song in a matter of minutes  
     Play it well enough to be recognizable.  
     sing you the words or make them up anyway.

I can write.

I have extensive knowledge in the subject of black holes  
 and how                      if a star gets too close, it is literally torn apart  
                                  they call it a tidal disruption because it blows material back into the atmosphere  
 I think this is the same thing that happens when you trap your emotions in a bottle  
     Like you were trying to trap cosmic rays.  
     or maybe let them go.

I can metaphor circles around you  
 I can throw one back              light one up              fit in when I need to.

But I can't tell you I'm alone.

or that I'm sad.

Or that emotions are like oxygen and I haven't used mine in so long  
     That my lungs are probably blacker than yours.

## Twice, at least

I loved you once, when we were teens  
lying on our stomachs listening to  
The Spill Canvas.  
Reading poetry to each other  
watering the carpet with giggles  
when we sang to the moon  
it thanked us.  
When you introduced me to whiskey  
and I learned what a  
good burn was.

Again, in my early twenties,  
after I learned that poetry is  
full of ghosts.  
After I pulled my eyelashes out like garden weeds  
and with them, my wishes.  
After I learned of a pain so strong you could taste it  
trace it  
along your ribs.  
After we tore up the carpet hiding our promises  
Skinned our knees on the polyester  
cut our fingers on the staples

When it was over I was bloody  
you were gone.

I took my best chaos  
and put it in a box today  
I loved you for years

I put that in a box too.  
If we took all of your teeth and all of my teeth  
and strung them together like a popcorn necklace  
we could hang them from the ceiling fan  
and watch them swing around

brief morbidity to cool us off from being such hotshots

I put our potshots in a box today  
I can pull it out when I'm feeling critical  
When the pavement makes me angry  
and I think I've always hated the sun  
and I think I remember you.

you	in the box	with the chaos
you	in the box	with the teeth.



It was the following Monday that I made my ludicrous attempt to return to school. My first class that morning was U.S. history. My friend Natalia was in the class with me and I pulled her into the hallway before it started. I had not told anyone at this point what had happened because I was unsure how to. I did not know what the protocol for this kind of situation was. My only option was to tell her point blank. The words felt like sand between my teeth, and try as I might, my tongue could barely navigate the particles out of my mouth. She gave me a hug and then asked me candidly what could possibly have made me think I should be at school. I mumbled something about homework assignments and a final coming up as we were about to be released for winter break. Towards the beginning of the day, I could not really tell if anyone knew what had happened. I am sure the teachers did, but I wasn't really paying attention to them. Kyle's brother went to the same school as me but I do not remember seeing him that week. I made it to third period before the full effect of what I was trying to accomplish collapsed on me. What was I doing there?

It felt like everyone was looking at me, talking about me, talking about Kyle, but I do not know that for sure. I cannot remember if I called my parents to tell them I was leaving, or if I just left. But I remember the walk out of the school. The hallways were empty because students were in class. There were a few stragglers, but they were not paying any more attention to me than I was to them. The staircase seemed longer than it had before. Each step hurt my legs, like cannon balls about to fall through the floor. It was a sequel to the day I was reteaching my body how to behave. I made it out to my car in the school parking lot which felt more like a five-mile hike than a 400-foot walk. And I sat there. I just sat. I could barely convince my body to make it to my car, there was no way I trusted myself to drive it. Finally, I started it. The familiar growl lifted the fog that had formed around my thoughts, jolting me back into the moment.

Then, I just kept driving. I'm inclined to say that I drove for hours, but it could have been any amount of time. The rest of that evening into the next morning plays more like a montage in my mind than a concrete memory. The best I can tell, most of that week followed a schedule of sleeping until my body ached, either not eating or trying to eat and being unable to keep it down, and then returning to my state of catatonia. The incessant sounds of people trying to reach me left me with no choice but to turn my phone off and store it in my desk drawer for the remainder of the week. I slowly but surely became less inert and the feeling in my limbs began to trickle back in. Eating became something I remembered to do, and I filled up the time in between deep sleeps with assignments my close friends brought to me. Eventually I returned to school.

Initially, it was easier than I expected it to be. The distraction was actually quite welcomed. And no one expected much from me. The teachers were pleased but concerned when I attended class and did not call home when I didn't. They understood, I guess. Homework was not explicitly optional but certainly presented itself as more of a suggestion than an assignment. I remember taking tests, but I have no recollection of receiving grades on them. This was how it went for a few weeks, at least. The distraction of having assignments to complete, projects to create, and papers to write helped with my state of total denial mixed with paralyzing weakness.

You're the litter of ashes  
spread across my poetry  
seeping into my notebook  
smudged on the tip of my index finger.

I swear I never wanted you to be a poem.

You used to be my escape  
now you're the barbed wire  
weaving through my ribcage.

Now you're the crossed-out line  
at the top of my page  
because even the right words look wrong  
    maybe it's the handwriting  
        maybe it isn't my hand  
does that make it someone else's poem?

You always wanted to be a poem  
you didn't understand what I meant  
when I said

we would be hurting  
the day you became my ink.

## Something to be Said

There is something to be said for  
someone who is good in a crisis

Who can buckle down buckle up buckle your seatbelt  
when your body has forgotten its obligations.

When your arms start to fizzle to  
that gray/blue dizzy static sting or tap or paralyzing sadness.

Someone who can make the calls send the emails order the food  
hands too busy stacking      legs too busy puttering

if only you had a third hand that could water the plants  
or feed the dog or straighten the pillows  
*or that I could hold*

Something to be said about someone who  
becomes a dietician when your cheeks sink below your jaw  
a dentist when your teeth fall out  
a pastor when your knees fall purple

who dawdles and moseys and dillydallies in your peripherals  
so when your bones crack under the weight of begging for an answer  
at least you can still move your eyes.

**Mad Poet**

But ever since *you*

My slant rhymes fall crooked sometimes  
I can make them sit up straight  
if guests are coming over.  
I think I'm screaming but  
I swallow the wrong syllables  
And you don't hear me anymore.

You weren't a poet  
but  
I bet you would have swallowed syllables wrong too  
if you wanted to.  
You liked to be sideways.

We liked to be warped.  
Twisted.  
A little wrong in the swallow.  
We colluded with the moon and almost  
Convinced it to snuff out the stars

instead  
we laced my poems with mercury  
and we both went mad.

If you want to hold  
my heart in your hands,  
You have to hold it like  
sand or water.  
Cup them together  
so if it breaks,  
the pieces  
don't fall through.  
I can't be missing part of it  
or I will never be able  
to put it back together.  
If you interlace your fingers  
with mine,  
I want my thumb on the inside.  
I know it's too specific.  
I know you are more comfortable  
with your thumb on the inside.  
But I am more comfortable  
with my heart being lonely  
than being scared.

In the months following his death, I became preoccupied with my emotions. When denial failed to protect me, I made the decision to completely and entirely feel every emotion that knocked on my door. I became unstable, unpredictable. I also became a poet. Like most, I started off as a really bad poet. I did not like what I was writing but it felt like fresh air just to write. I was feeling awful things and I found the power to dress them up in metaphor and hyperbole, and to waltz them around like a show dog. I created a blog for myself to anonymously post poetry for a community that said they understood. This community swallowed my poetry whole, while I was barely choking it out. What was masked as an online support group quickly and stealthily became the rabbit hole I would later find to be severe depression, bordering on mania. I would find myself completely consumed with the give and take of commiserations. The darker the poems became, the more encouraging this group was. We told ourselves there was comfort in numbers. We convinced ourselves that the things we were saying, the things we were doing, were okay. Anything you are currently imagining is a slight drizzle compared to the storms we were conjuring behind each other's skulls.

This group looked at bruises under eyes and called them violets. This group looked at two-inch long scars and called them maps to one's inner galaxy. Skin was a canvas destined to be carved into. Bodies were made to be physical art in the most destructive way. You can ask me why victims do not leave their abusers and I will tell you that this poetry blog was the best and worst thing to ever happen to me. There were moments of beauty, real moments of love. But there was substantially more darkness and distortion and fuzzy lines between self-care and self-destruction. I was immersed in this universe for several years before I started to even realize the toxicity and how it was drowning me in subtle ways. My poems were desperate and pleading and sometimes cliché. They were raw and vulnerable and unpolished. Too often, they rhymed, which I cannot

stand when I return to them. It took me years to detach myself from this community. I had built bonds with the people in this group and we fed off of each other's self-destruction. We were incorrigible and delicate, and we were broken but we told each other the pieces could be melted back together like aluminum with a flame. I fell into a dialogue with several of them trading war stories and worries and fears. I found a strange comfort and a deep sadness in learning that others shared my worries and my fears.

**[The following poems were pulled from the blog from which I found myself, and  
then lost myself in]**



I was always told growing up  
That home is where the heart is.  
But everyone forgets to mention  
That the sentiment requires a caveat.  
It should be written in bold  
On every street corner  
DO NOT make a home out of a heartbeat.  
Regardless of the rhythm that swept you out of consciousness.  
(you'll lose sight of whether you're awake or not)  
DO NOT search for galaxies in their eyes  
Regardless of the light you think you see  
(stars, though beautiful, still burn up and burn out)  
DO NOT trace the freckles on their backs  
Regardless of the constellations you create in your mind  
(you will never look at the night sky the same way)  
DO NOT breathe in their words too deep  
Regardless of the way everything they say becomes poetry  
(it will become impossible to distinguish a love letter from a suicide note)  
DO NOT make poetry out of the cuts on their wrist  
Regardless of the romance they attach to it  
(self-destruction is not beauty, it's pain)  
DO NOT make someone's presence your happiness  
Regardless of how empty you feel in their absence  
(and don't you dare fill that void with alcohol)  
I was always told growing up  
That home is where the heart is.  
But everyone forgets to mention  
That the sentiment requires a caveat  
It should be written in bold  
On every street corner  
That destroying yourself for love  
Is still destroying yourself.

**Don't you dare give up on me**  
**I swear I can be what you want me to be.**

You can pick my accentuating ingredients  
 And eliminate the unfavorable ones.  
 Select the flavors that excite your senses.  
 Serve me up just how you like me;  
 A little overcooked and underwhelming.  
 Use your knife to slice me up  
 Prop me up, and cover me over  
 In a vinaigrette made of self hatred  
 And dependency.  
 Reassemble to your version of perfection.  
 Cater to your need to feel wanted.

I'll let you scrape off all of my features  
 So you have a blank canvas.  
 Feed me salads made of larger chests  
 Smaller waists and fat free dressing.  
 Etch your dreams into me and  
 Carve your signature onto my ankle.  
 But don't forget to clean out my skin  
 From underneath your fingernails.

Take my words and fill them with helium.  
 I'll silently watch them float away  
 As you write me a new script.  
 Write me the words that you want to hear  
 And I'll write you a lullaby.

You have my permission to obliterate my identity.  
 Create someone new  
 A little less me.            A little more you.  
 I know you want me.  
 Or at least you used to.  
 All those things you used to love  
 That now make you ache with disgust?  
 Erase them from your memory  
 I don't need them anymore.

Make me someone you can love again  
Because I would rather chew off my own wrist  
Than break your heart  
By letting go of your hand.

I can't explain it.  
Not rationally, at least.  
I guess I'll plead insane.  
I love the way my skin looks  
When it's set against crimson red.

Bear with me.  
I love  
The way my voice sounds  
When I'm breaking my teeth  
On forgotten promises.  
Choking on lost words  
That you never said  
And never will say.

I can't define it.  
I swear the hurt is humbling.  
The darkness is my key into the light.  
My heart is breaking  
In all the right ways.  
My ribs are shattering  
Snapping and cracking  
Causing the best possible pain.  
You were the worst thing  
That I didn't know I needed.  
Thank you for breaking  
And beating and bruising  
And consuming  
Every atom of me  
Because now I have a body  
Built with all new atoms.  
Now I have a body  
That you have never touched.

**Strangers**

There are strangers in my bones  
Tapping and stomping  
Pacing and yelling.  
Who am I to decide if they are welcome?  
I don't treat my bones  
The way a permanent resident would.

There are storms in my eyes  
Where waves beat against my skull.  
The pounding drowns out the screams  
But I can't ignore the hurricane  
Brewing behind my back.

There is a black hole in my heart  
Where emptiness and heaviness  
Pull so hard that even light can't escape.  
But the supernova bursting through my veins  
Burns the skin that it tries to illuminate.

The birds are taking flight in my stomach  
Fluttering up through my throat  
A few get stuck in my lungs  
And have no choice  
But to panic into a frenzy  
Until my windpipes give out  
And their wings deteriorate.

There are strangers in my bones  
That are using my marrow  
To build homes of their own.  
They are trying to stop the bleeding  
But it continues to disperse  
Like a fatal gas.  
These strangers in my bones  
Are little soldiers masquerading  
Around as little blood cells.  
They protect me, fighting off foreign matter  
Like the soul in my body  
That is certainly not my own.

Don't touch me  
don't touch me  
I'm manic I'm manic I'm  
Manic  
I'm screaming through  
a jaw that you  
wired shut  
I'm screaming so desperately  
my body is rattling so hard that my teeth  
grew claws and latched on  
but some of them still  
are falling out  
plummeting they're plummeting  
I'm manic  
please save me  
don't touch me  
please save me  
I'm manic I'm manic I'm manic  
I'm  
Manic

My poetry became darker and more violent as I buried myself in a depression similar to Kyle's but entirely my own. As I was starting to recovery from this, I had to swear off poetry completely. I had to remove myself from the blog, deleting the majority of the poetry with it—a decision I am still proud of, and deeply regretful of. I had to find a balance between writing what was raw and vulnerable and honest, and what was dangerous. While the darker poems felt right at the time, like a bug to a bulb, I was enticed by something that would only burn me. Drawn to something I should stay away from. I immersed myself in other things: school work, gymnastics, getting tattoos. I found anything and everything to try and rebuild my life, to rediscover who I could still be.

It took me years to build things up again, to find a way to care about things without the fear that they would disappear. I am still learning. I will probably always be learning. Through everything that happened, I learned a lot about myself, the people around, and what mattered to me in the world. I learned that love cannot stop death because Kyle was loved by everyone who knew him. I learned that when you're young, you think parents are unbreakable, but I watched his mother break. And I have watched her rebuild. I learned about resiliency and growing up too quickly.

I recently learned this again, during this project. On the morning of April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, my dad's heart gave out and would not restart. I have been told that it was not a surprise, that we sort of expected it, just didn't know quite when, but I am not sure I agree with that. I'm not sure you ever really *can* expect someone's death. You cannot know the feeling of it before it happens. You cannot prepare your stomach to feel empty for weeks, or every heartbeat to physically hurt, to feel stolen. These were the two big deaths in my life thus far, and they felt/feel eerily similar. I could

not prepare for my father's death any more than I could have prepared for Kyle's. And I cannot see another way out of it, except for writing through it.

**[The following are letters that have been submitted by the deepest of family and friends of Kyle's. It was important to me that these voices were heard.]**



Dearest Kyle,

March 10, 2019

It's snowing outside right now—in March! Isn't that what life is like though, some of what you expect, and a lot of what you don't? You leaving me, us, was very unexpected. Something I had worried about only in the few weeks prior to December, but then there it was, like a freight train, or tsunami...or gunshot. A nightmare that I haven't woken up from—not even 5 years later. Everything changed that morning. *Everything*. Your loss left a hole in the world, and things I was sure were true, were confused, and all that was left was pain. Or whatever the new word was for pain, because losing you was so much bigger than that. I still haven't found a way to really express what happens to a mother after she loses her child, or a family after they lose their person that brings all of the noise, laughter (and chaos) into the room. Yes, you glue yourself back together in some fashion that resembles who you were, and people will actually believe that you have “healed” because you really get good at pretending to be the old you, or the old family. But you laugh a little less, and you hope a little less, and you cry a lot more, (but now in secret). I love you and I miss you, and my heart physically aches for you.

So, our family limps on. The boys have graduated college and have started their lives. It's so strange to see them now older than you were when you left. It highlights how young you were, and how much you are missing. The last time we had a heart to heart was only 4 days before you died, and I went to bed that night feeling so excited for you, and so proud of where your life was heading—I hope you knew that. Your sister is growing up; now 12 years old. She has some memories of you, but bottles most things up, (primarily because she's mad at you). She doesn't remember enough of you to balance out her feelings, I think. It breaks my heart, but everything about your death breaks my heart.

We have a little puppy now. You would absolutely love him. It sounds cliché, but he has brought so much love into our house and helped heal us a little. It reminds me of that time, a month or two before you died, when you stopped your car to rescue that mangy little dog at like 5:00 in the morning on your way to work. You were so worried about him, that while you coaxed him back to your apartment you left your car in the road with the door open and were late to work! Those things didn't even cross your mind. That's the kind and loving person you were. God, I miss you.

I don't know where you are now. I read so many books after you died, trying to figure that out. I looked for you in every light flicker, sound, and dream, with limited success. Now that feverish need has subsided, and I just hope you are out there *somewhere*, happy, smiling that crooked, knowing smile, and at peace. I hope that we will be together again. I hope that I can see you face, and hug you tight, and look into your eyes, and say, “I love you”.

You are my sunshine, my Punky-roo, my Kylster, my beautiful son,

I love you always,

Maawwmm, Momrade, Mom...Mommy

9 Mar 2019

Dear Kyle,

It has been five years since your death. I wish you were still alive. By now you would have figured out that life is just one set of unsolvable problems after another—by the time you have come to grips with one crisis, it's already shape-shifted on you, and you are dealing with a completely different thing. A little more living would have given you the confidence to shoulder that burden—but you didn't allow yourself that time. And so, here we are. Well, it's not like I'm offering you advice, anyway. You are way beyond that. Nor do I have any wisdom to offer, now. What can I teach you about life and death that you don't already know?

“The night is the night,  
It begins with the morning,  
It lays me to you.”

You know more about that night than I do, now. Nor is there any point in reciting the events of the past five years, as if you were on deployment and wanted to hear about our puppy, or as if I wanted you to examine and judge the results of your actions. You are beyond those things now. A father should teach, and listen, and quietly provide, and of course I can do none of these things for you now. Those are for the living. But a father still has the power to bless his family, even the dead, and perhaps especially the dead. That is the only gift I have left to give you. So that is what I will offer, a blessing from the Old Testament:

May the Lord bless and keep you.

May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious towards you.

May the Lord look upon you with kindness and give you His peace.

That's about as timeless as things get, on my side of the wall between us. We will meet again, on your side.

Love,  
George

March 13, 2019

Dearest Kyle,

I am writing this letter to you today to express my sincere feeling of sadness that I need to apologize for letting you down. I wish I had expressed my feeling more to you, I wish you felt that no matter what, that I love you, unconditionally. You are my first grandchild. I miss you so much. As I reflect on my thoughts of my hopes for your future, your life that you could have made for yourself, I wish you could have seen the promise that I saw.

I am sorry for your pain, I am sorry I could not have taken it away from you, I am sorry. You will always be my sweet, loving, caring star. I see you every night in the stars.

Please forgive me.

Gramma (Mema)

Dear Kyle,

I thought I wanted to write you an angry letter, but the more I think about it the more my feelings transform. I wanted to make it about me, about the pain I felt at a time when I was already experiencing a lot of pain. Maybe it's just easier to fill in the blanks with my own emotions and reactions because I don't know the details of what was going on for you on that last day.

We lost touch. I still think back on the last two times I saw you. In one, I dropped you off at Safeway for work after driving you and Eli around back-country roads in my car for a while. I don't think we were really going anywhere, just driving. There was music playing. I don't think we talked much; we were just there. The other last time was at a party in somebody's backyard. You took a literally flaming shot of fireball, or three. You seemed . . . determined. Determined to get fucked up enough to stop caring. I don't remember which memory was the very last anymore.

But I do remember the day of your funeral. I woke up and took a big shot of red wine. Bitter. I cried a lot. For a long time, I felt guilty about your death, as if I could have somehow single-handedly prevented it if I'd reached out to you more. My head gets a little big sometimes. The church was full of people who loved you. I don't know, maybe it wasn't full, but it felt like it. I hated the sermon. It felt empty. People held hands. We held a wake for you. We took shots of fireball and were just there together. Some Mormon missionaries came to the door and somebody explained to them what the day meant for us. I think it was Lucas . . . They dropped the sales pitch and said a prayer for you. It's moments like that, fueled by human compassion, that affect me and stick with me the most. I feel like those moments happened more effortlessly and more often in that group of friends than in most circles. I don't know, Kyle. There was something special about our friends. Maybe that's just nostalgia talking, or maybe it was the perfect mix of adolescent naivety and kind hearts. Who knows, but I'm grateful to this day. There's something about the friendships you have when you're young that makes them impossible to recreate. So much has changed . . .

Things are supposed to change though. Maybe things would have changed for you if you'd stuck around to find out. We could have been nearing the definition of "old friends" by now, catching up over coffee, going to the coast and gazing out at the horizon, grateful to have survived all the crazy shit life's thrown our way so far, grateful to have learned from it all.

I don't know, man. I know "what if's" are pointless. I also know there's a lot I don't know. It's been a long journey, but I feel like I've made peace with what I do know of your story. There's so much more I could say, details about the insane paths I've gone down in my mind and the versions of this letter I've tried to write, but this one feels good, right now, today. That's all we ever really have: right now, today. It will never stop breaking my heart that you didn't give yourself a chance to see how things could get brighter, and I am still a little angry that you gave up and left everybody else to pick up the pieces. Hell, maybe I haven't made peace with it after all. I just hope your soul's in a happier place and my heart goes out to your family, our old friends, and everybody who still loves and misses you.

I've been reading into the difference between pain and suffering lately. Suffering is what happens when you let your pain consume you, suffocate you, and control your life. Suffering is optional, pain isn't. If you can learn to feel your pain without fearing it or getting lost in it, then you can learn how to live through it without believing it defines you, and come out the other side a stronger, wiser person, more prepared for the next bout, whatever form it may take. Just

something to think about. I still ponder the fact that energy never dies when I look up at the trees. You're still out there, in one way or another. And you're in here. You always will be.

You're an idiot. I love you.

~Sarah

Our lives are continuously contextualized by the people we see leave before us. You were the first person for me to see go in a way I could not cope with. The ambiguous circumstances surrounding your passing have left me to genuflect in the dark for years; to abandon my pragmatic approach to life and believe you have found peace after death. Not because I do, (or at least not at this point in my life) but because I want to. Because I don't want to believe your final days were filled with an uncontrollable grief that you could no longer cope with; because I don't want to believe the space that had been growing between us was partially my fault; that I failed to detect warning signs that had been showing themselves for years. The truth is it's almost impossible for me to understand without embracing the idea that I could have made more of an effort. These thoughts are moot. You live within my life day to day without me realizing it. You shaped fundamental philosophical ideologies I carry with me today, and I continue to emulate your romantic nature, your kindness, and writing ability. As life moves and I see more people I love pass, I've learned that at some point, either everyone I know will be a passing I must deal with, or I will go first. For as traumatic as it was to experience your death, I'm glad you didn't have to experience mine. I never wanted to see you suffer. And as selfish as it was for you to take your own life, I forgive you.

Brendan Murphy

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